

BEYOND THE SUPERMARKET: LOST OPPORTUNITIES IN SUMMER STUDY ABROAD FOR SINGAPORE SOJOURNERS IN AUSTRALIA

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ABSTRACT

The experiences of a group of Singaporean students on a summer study abroad programme in Australia are explored in this case study. The case is discussed within the context of the complex mix of influences operating on higher education innovations for internationalisation in Singapore, including the development of Singaporean students as global citizens and Australian offerings for the Asia Pacific higher education market. The vision and purpose of the summer study abroad programme, the students' motivations and development of cultural perspectives, the students' views of the teaching and learning strategies, and teaching styles are explored. The case study draws attention to a variety of issues regarding summer study abroad in Australia for Singaporean and possibly other Asia Pacific students; in particular the importance of, and the logistical barriers to, inter-cultural student engagement. Implications include the need to challenge stereotypical views of Singaporean and Australian students, provide structured opportunities for inter-cultural engagement, appropriate teaching and learning strategies, and support for a reflective approach to inter-cultural learning combined with strategies for developing the student group as a community of learners.

STUDY ABROAD IN AUSTRALIA AS AN INTERNATIONALISATION STRATEGY

Study abroad has for many years been assumed to build international understanding and cooperation, global perspectives and inter-cultural skills for student sojourners (Mestenhauser 1998: xi, 2002; Mestenhauser & Ellingboe 1998) and is recommended as a curriculum strategy for internationalisation (Whalley 1997; Bremer & Van Der Wende 1995; Leask 1999, 2001, 2006, 2007). Theorising internationalisation of the curriculum as an educational response to globalisation envisions study abroad as a means to fulfil the egalitarian and humanistic promises of higher education. According to the International Association of Universities (IAU),

internationalisation "represents a commitment to international solidarity, human security and helps build a climate of global peace" (IAU 1998: 1).

Internationalisation is, however, a complex phenomenon while the educational vision of academics exerts pressure for change from below, many researchers have shown that universities are increasingly required to become globally competitive as the sector is deregulated and exposed to market forces (Marginson 2006a, 2006b; Rizvi 2005, 2006; Rizvi & Walsh 1998; Dale & Robertson 2003; Kell & Vogl 2007; Kell & Herrington 2007; Kell et al. 2004; Luke 2005; Pick 2004; Slaughter & Leslie 1997). In Australia tensions between the economic and educational rationales for internationalisation were noted in a report from the Australian Vice-Chancellor's Committee (AVCC) describing the internationalisation of higher education as "important to Australia for its social, cultural and intellectual benefits [yet] at the same time it is also essential to maintain the strong international student market in Australia" (AVCC 2004: 22–23).

In 2006, 23% of all tertiary students studying in Australia came from overseas countries (DEST 2007) and generated \$10.1 billion in revenue in the 2005/2006 financial year (Bishop 2007) with many of these students from the Asia Pacific region. A further source of income from Asia Pacific students is through short-term summer study abroad programmes which are typically of 6 weeks duration and offer a holiday/study combination. The number of students enrolled in summer study abroad in Australia is not known, however most Australian university web sites offer summer programmes with various general education courses such as languages and cultural studies. According to a UNESCO report the growing emphasis on economic competitiveness within the higher education sector has seen the offering of curricula perceived to meet the needs of the global education marketplace (UNESCO 2004), and summer study abroad may prove both a revenue raising strategy for Australian universities and a less expensive option for Asia Pacific students interested in study abroad.

DEVELOPING A CRITICAL MINDSET

A "policy mix of strong state intervention and a commitment to neo-liberal market ideology has influenced the nature and character of the engagement of universities within the Asia Pacific region" (Kell & Vogl 2007: 12) and links with Singapore are being established by Australian universities. Singapore is aiming to establish itself as a regional hub for international education (DFAT 2005: xi) and in 2006, the President of the National University of Singapore, referring to the links between the emergence of

global economic powers in Asia and the development of the higher education sector, spoke of the need for Asian universities to attain "a global mix of creative talents through joint appointments [to give Asian universities] an extra competitive edge ... a way to help one another leapfrog into the company of the Elite Dozen" (Shih 2006).

In Singapore, the building of creative synergies in higher education is supported by the fostering of creativity and innovation in schools (Tan 2003). One of the key strategies of the Singaporean government is to steer the Singaporean mindset towards a risk-taking culture, to shape national development by re-engineering the state as a knowledge building enterprise whilst balancing the incorporation of national values (Mok 2003) and the development of a critical thinking mindset is highlighted by former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, reported in the *Straits Times* as having said, "We've got to try and amend or modify our education system. Or more important, the mindset. Even though you don't want to question your teacher, you have a question mark against what he has pronounced as inalienable truth and then challenge it quietly and maybe prove him wrong" (Ng 2001: 192–193).

The intersection of the Singapore national strategy, the development of Australian education programmes for the Asian higher education market, and the development of cross-institutional international linkages form the context of the case study outlined in this paper.

THE SUMMER STUDY ABROAD CASE STUDY

A student exchange programme was originally adopted as a strategy to support the development of a risk-taking mindset in a group of students from a Singaporean university. The university planned a programme at an Australian university that was to be specifically designed for a group of students from the advanced science stream. The students' backgrounds reflected the Singapore cultural mix of Straits Chinese, Indian, Malaysian and international students from the Asia Pacific region studying at the Singapore university. The original proposal envisaged by the university was for an 'exchange' programme with an Australian university in which a student group from each university would exchange places, living and studying on campus together with local students. This proved impossible to arrange as student accommodation was not available during session time so an alternative summer study abroad programme was scheduled during the Australian summer break when most Australian students and staff were absent from the campus. The programme comprised two general education

courses from the Australian university's summer programme and a biology course with a 5-day field study in a camp-style communal environment.

THE VISION AND PURPOSE OF THE SUMMER STUDY ABROAD PROGRAMME

The Singaporean academics understood the purpose of the programme as to develop the students' ability to be innovative and creative, and to operate in a global science environment where risk-taking and spontaneity are needed, characteristics they believed were not Singaporean.

"The programme is there for a very simple reason you see ... our students are very bright ... they know what they are doing, they are smart. However the Singaporean is very reserved, and they are not usually willing to take risks. Neither are they willing to even answer a question, because they lose face, or they look stupid in front of their peers, their lecturers, you know? This fear of doing something silly, making mistakes, or venturing into new ground, is a very Singaporean attribute." (Singaporean coordinator)

From the Singaporean coordinator's perspective, the perceived fear of losing face led to a fear of asking questions in the public arena of the lecture theatre, even when encouraged by their lecturers.

"You see, we always encourage our students, ask me questions—that's the only way you know. Our students tend not to, they are always afraid that they will ask a stupid question." (Singaporean coordinator)

The Singapore academics believed that their science graduates needed a combination of the perceived Singaporean strengths of "diligence" and "substance" together with "*Aussie flair*". The academics explained that exposing their students to the perceived Australian characteristics of spontaneous/impulsive questioning would support them in developing this combination of characteristics.

"In the real world we are living here, think, it is not just how much you know, as how you sell that knowledge, correct? ... Once the [Australian] students are seen ... pushing it, [the Singaporean students] do a damn sight better job." (Singaporean coordinator)

THE STUDENTS

I was able to interview approximately 50% of the students and these had their own strong reasons for choosing to participate in the programme and showed an eagerness to communicate and learn from personally challenging experiences. Openness to experience, acceptance of challenges with grace and understanding, and a desire for learning and growth were commonly expressed. The students were seeking new and broader cultural experiences, learning independence, getting along and living with others, and improving interpersonal skills.

"My mentality of coming here is more like coming out of your comfort zone." (student)

All of the students I interviewed described pleasures, benefits and challenges, and the general sense of personal development and learning through the experience of a different culture was enthusiastically discussed, with one student commenting:

"I should get back wiser." (student)

The students were all enthusiastic about the personal skills they had developed on the field trip and in student accommodation. They mostly agreed that they rarely or never went to the supermarket or cooked, and rarely even entered the kitchen at home while washing up, even making their own beds, were in general new tasks for them. A developing awareness of the ways in which other people might live was engendered by the programme and explained by one of the students:

"... you change...there are different feelings." (student)

They accepted challenges and disappointments, including the lack of information and guidance, as a learning experience that contributed to the development of their living skills.

"It's important for us to keep an open heart and an open mind, you might not get the things you want in life but you must learn different cultures, different environments, and different situations." (student)

One student spoke of how he had prepared himself for the challenge.

"I am mentally prepared that some of the ideas that this person has might be very different from mine." (student)

The students pointed out that few of them knew each other when they boarded the plane in Singapore and by the last week of the programme there were still students who did not know each other. While the Singaporean academic staff had agreed that:

"Singaporean students, they don't tend to mix very much ... just that we are very shy basically." (Singaporean coordinator)

While the students would have appreciated some introduction to their fellow students, they found their own way in coming to understand the different teaching and learning approaches they encountered.

TEACHING AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES

On the field trip, students worked in three large groups, each under the leadership of a tutor or lecturer. The leader would take a group into the field, for example to inspect small animal traps, then students would return to the work centre and complete project sheets using various materials and resources. For this work they split off into smaller self-chosen groups of 3–4 students.

The students commented that the Australian University field study teachers were less likely to challenge them to think than were the university field study teachers. Although there was some disagreement on this issue, most felt that they were not made to think creatively on the field trip but were instead required to do a significant amount of rote learning. While they were accustomed to this style of learning in their university laboratory classes, it was unfavourably compared to the learning on field trips from their own university in Singapore where the teachers, instead of answering questions, would teach them to use a questioning approach.

"If [the university teaching assistants] are asking a question, the teacher assistant normally won't give the answers directly. They will guide them to the thinking, they will let them figure out the answer themselves. But here it is like we are doing our labs. Whenever we

encounter a problem, we ask the tutor ... and they will just give us an answer." (student)

Of course, the Singaporean academics also had a variety of teaching styles and these had an impact on student effort. When asked what type of learning was encouraged there, one student replied that in Singapore:

"Some lecturers get you to think deeply, but sometimes certain lecturers if they want us to really think deep over something they will set questions in exams. If they don't then I might not be bothered." (student)

In the general education courses, some students made the discovery that knowledge could be relative and discussion could be subjective which added a completely new dimension in thinking:

"The lecturer has a point of view. She makes a point by saying so ... we are very objective. You can't say that I don't think this is correct." (student)

On the other hand, some students considered the other general education course as a waste of time, as one explained:

"It was really boring, you don't learn anything at all, you just go through the instruments, the cabinet and copy and write." (student)

The teachers were described as knowledgeable, friendly, understanding, informative and supportive, and their appreciation of this style is shown by the following interaction between two students.

"But the difference in [teaching] styles is something that is refreshing for us." (student)

"More interactive." (student)

"At home there is always a distance between us and the lecturer." (student)

"To show respect for the elder." (student)

"But I can't imagine being engaged with our lecturers like that." (student)

"No not ever." (student)

The students found it easier to approach and interact with the Australian teachers than with their Singaporean teachers. They found what

they described as the Australian teaching style quite a change from the more formal approach in Singapore where teachers were described as having a hierarchical culture.

"[Australian teachers] are more encouraging and honest than in Asian countries." (student)

Where the Singaporean coordinator described the students as unwilling to take risks and ask questions, for the students it was the Singapore teaching culture that made asking questions difficult.

CROSS-INSTITUTIONAL STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

The students spoke of their enjoyment of what they thought of as the Australian sense of humour and the culture of casual friendliness and informality, yet when asked if they had developed skills to work with people from different cultures, one student said:

"We are not really exposed to a lot of foreign students, so not really." (student)

Engagement with the Australian university students was limited to their arrival when they were met at the airport by some students who had taken part in the study abroad programme at Singapore.

"Actually the locals are very helpful... they pick us up at the airport, they go out with us to get essential items, they drove some of us to the local supermarket. If they didn't do that... we didn't know what kind of supermarket there was or where it was." (student)

The Singapore students had joined the programme in the expectation of working with local students in lectures, labs and group projects, and that expectation was a key motivation for joining the programme, but the absence of this engagement led to a less than satisfactory cultural experience.

"... you have the same feeling as when you are studying in Singapore. It's just that the location is different." (student)

Beyond the supermarket visit and the presence of some the Australian university students in some lectures, the only significant contact with locals during their sojourn was with the Australian teaching staff. This lack of contact and involvement in local activity was a great disappointment to the students, some of whom hoped to make Australian contacts in their discipline and all of whom wanted to broaden their cultural perspectives and visit a local family.

"We need more interaction. We should be encouraged to work on projects together. I think it is more about interaction through work than having a party." (student)

The students explained that it was difficult to meet Australian students, both in and out of class, and so they would have liked a programme to help them get to know host country students.

"Because it is a new country we tend to stick together and the Australian students, it is very hard to meet them." (student)

They echoed the university coordinator view that Singapore students stick together, however, they were sensitive to the underlying reasons related to their feelings of insecurity in an alien environment.

CASE DISCUSSION

This case study draws attention to a variety of issues regarding summer study abroad in Australia for Singaporean and possibly other Asia Pacific students, in particular the administrative difficulties of overcoming barriers to inter-cultural student engagement.

VISION AND STEREOTYPE

A complex mix of influences is operating on higher education innovations for internationalisation in Singapore. In this case, it seems likely that the imperatives of Singaporean national policy and strategy in building Singapore as a hub in the international knowledge economy (Mok 2003; Tan 2003; Shih 2006; Ng 2001) combined with the institution's needs to be actively involved in this national strategy, and to grow and develop within the global education market as articulated within the university's annual

report, strongly influenced this innovation. From my discussions with members of staff, a common vision of science as an international pursuit and of the need for science graduates to have global skills and perspectives emerged along with the significance of existing and developing strategic linkages between the two universities.

The expansive vision of internationalisation held by the Singaporean academics contrasts sharply with their views of Singaporean students as risk-averse, rote learners, and of Australian students as self-confident and assertive. In this case, summer study abroad was a strategy to develop in Singaporean students the style of behaviour or character required by the national strategy, with Australian students as the role models. This strategy was operating on several stereotypical assumptions.

The assumptions underlying the strategy were, however, never tested because the academics at the Australian university were logistically unable to implement the vision. This situation echoes the logistical problem found in a study by Barkhuizen and Feryok (2006). In that case, as in this, there was no accommodation available on campus during the university teaching semesters, so the idea of Australian and Singaporean students learning together became a lost opportunity as logistical considerations swamped academic ones.

CROSS-INSTITUTIONAL COLLABORATION

The top-down nature of the evolution of the programme and the absence of time and resources for the development and implementation of the programme, placed the Australian staff in the difficult position of implementing an impossible vision. Just a month before the students were due to arrive, the Australian academics were expressing their sense of unease about how the programme would run and wondering how the unexpected administrative difficulties they were encountering, such as dealing with Australian immigration, organising airport transfers, student accommodation and staffing issues would work out. This focus on the minutia of administrative work was beyond the usual expectations of academic work and took up a great deal of time that might have been otherwise spent in curriculum discussion with their Singaporean counterparts. There was simply no time for the kind of collaboration, discussion and reflection that might expose assumptions about learning and teaching within an international environment, and no time to design a study abroad programme to meet agreed purposes.

STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS AND MOTIVATION

While the students demonstrated high levels of motivation and self-directed learning through reflection on observation, it would not be correct to assume that these were typical entry characteristics of the whole group because the students I interviewed were selected by the Singaporean university administrator as those more likely to provide information about their experiences. I know that some of the students who were not selected for interviews and with whom I had some informal conversations found the conditions at the field centre quite challenging.

The students I did interview displayed traits of observation, thoughtfulness and flexibility, and a pro-active approach to inter-cultural engagement. It is interesting to compare the students' desires to move outside their comfort zone and have an open heart and mind, both terms that were used by several students, with the university coordinator's view of the Singaporean character as unwilling to take risks. These students were seeking a broader cultural experience that would enable them to develop an international perspective, learn how to be independent, to get along and live with others, and to improve interpersonal skills. They expressed high levels of intrinsic motivation towards being culturally and personally challenged, and took a pro-active approach to inter-cultural engagement, evincing similar personal factors to the Singaporean students in a study on transnational higher education that points to the critical nature of student entry characteristics (Pyvis & Chapman 2004). The Pyvis and Chapman study found that Singaporean students in transnational education programmes were consciously seeking an international outlook, viewing international education as a long-term investment in career advancement and life-long personal development, choosing an offshore programme as a "deliberate, informed strategy to achieve their goals and progress along the desired trajectory" because it would "contribute to the construction of an 'international person'" (Pyvis & Chapman 2004: 31). Transnational students "are using the internationalisation of higher education to extend and deepen their capacity for thinking and acting globally, nationally and locally in order to enhance the viability of their life trajectories" (Singh 2005: 9). In this case the Singaporean summer study abroad students displayed characteristics similar to those in the transnational case study.

TEACHING AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES

The absence of local students from the learning environment meant opportunities for inter-cultural engagement in mutual learning were clearly limited.

The field work strategy was staff-led observational project work, a strategy which limits the opportunities for development of autonomous learning skills in comparison with problem based project work (Kent et al. 1997) and to some extent my observations at the field centre confirm this limitation. I observed a general didactic teaching style, for example, in viewing the animal traps some of which were empty, rather than asking the students why that might be the case the lecturer simply explained the reason. There were many opportunities for students to hypothesise, in the field and back at the field centre, that were not utilised as the lecturer and the tutors habitually responded to questions with answers.

The differences in teaching approach within educational institutions in Singapore and Australia may be as significant, if not more so, than any assumed differences between Singaporean and Australian universities in terms of the use of didactic and student-centred teaching.

The apparent contradiction in the nature of the two general education courses is of interest. Where one course led some of these science students to broaden their epistemological perspectives and to consider the nature of knowledge from a relativist viewpoint, the other required the sketching of scientific instruments viewed through the glass doors of a locked cabinet. The students' desires for intellectual challenge are an interesting counterpoint to the idea that summer study abroad programmes should not be intellectually taxing.

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

The students who reported seeking experiences beyond the "comfort zone", who relied on their own observations and reflections to develop understanding and competence in living and studying within the Australian culture; who built their own group identities and took a reflective approach to the whole experience; reported the development of the kinds of personal factors that are generally attributed to study abroad programmes – independence, adaptability and self-confidence. In these students, there was a general sense of personal development, becoming wiser, and learning through the experience of a different perspective, culture and teaching approach. For other students who may have been less motivated, the

absence of a process for group development may have made the experience lonely and unsatisfying.

The students' comments and my observations during and after the field trip suggest that various personal and cultural differences were affecting both the individual student's ability to develop an expansive cultural perspective through the summer study abroad experience and the broader group dynamic. A reflective process for student learning from the study abroad experience, and a process to support the students in working collaboratively within the large group, had not been considered within the teaching and learning strategies. Given the pressures on staff, it is easy to understand why these forms of support were not considered, however, this kind of summer study abroad programme offers the opportunity to develop a community of student learners able to get the most benefit from the experience, an opportunity that in this case was lost.

IMPLICATIONS

While it is not possible to generalise from one case study, it is possible to infer some implications for Asia Pacific students sojourning in Australia on summer study abroad programmes, and perhaps more generally in seeking answers to the question "how to create an academic and cultural environment in which students are motivated consistently to penetrate the surface of their host culture enough to apprehend meaningfully and respect a world not habitually their own" (Engle & Engle 2002: 37). Several implications are considered below.

The vision for the programme was based on a set of assumptions about the nature of Australian and Singaporean students, and the ways in which Singaporean students develop certain behaviours. While there is potential for international learning and growth from courses/programmes offering cross-institutional engagement for students, there is a need to challenge the stereotypical view, in this case study of Singaporean students as deficient in a particular set of nationally desired attributes, and of Australian students as possessing these attributes.

Educators and educational administrators cannot simply rely on putting students together to bring about cultural change (Devos 2003; Wright & Lander 2003). The notion that Singaporean students will develop certain characteristics simply through contact with Australian students was not able to be tested in this case, however, research indicates that without structured support for inter-cultural learning, stereotypes and cultural insularity may be reinforced rather than broken down (Hellmundt et al.

1998; Biggs & Watkins 1996; Chalmers & Volet 1997; Volet & Ang 1998; Devos 2003; De Vita 2005). Instead institutions need to meet the challenge "to develop joint degrees and develop programmes that feature collaborative design and delivery ... [and] a more authentic internationalisation that requires opportunities for partnerships, exchange, engagement" (Kell & Vogl 2007: 26).

The Singaporean students found the staff-led field work at the Australian university unchallenging compared to their experiences in Singapore and this sets up a challenge to educators in both Singapore and Australia. The case supports a mission-oriented fieldwork model that encourages independent, active, and interactive problem-solving work for Singaporean students. Activities that require learning by rote are not appropriate for Singapore students. Learning activities should offer challenge, demand academic rigour and involve cross-disciplinary perspectives.

The development of international skills and perspectives within student exchange programmes may be conceptualised as a form of experiential inter-cultural learning. Students should be supported in taking a critically reflective approach to learn through and from the experience, while strategies for developing the student group as a community of learners would support all students in learning from the summer study abroad experience.

Ironically while the main driver of the programme was the perception by Singapore academics of students as deficient in skills such as spontaneity and risk-taking, the key strategy to develop these skills through propinquity with Australian students was never able to be realised because of logistical difficulties. This case supports the contention that for students to develop the openness and empathy for successful inter-cultural experiences summer study abroad needs to have "mechanisms for meaningful, regular cultural contact and reflection upon that interaction by a philosophy informing all aspects of programme design" (Engle & Engle 2002: 33–34). If cross-institutional student engagement is to be a central internationalisation strategy, then ways must be found to overcome the logistical difficulties of providing genuine exchange programmes in which students live and learn on campus with host country students. Administrators need to take a collaborative approach and talk with academics about these difficulties and blockages, and seek ways to overcome them.

There is a danger that the experience of summer study abroad that offers some opportunities for learning from immersion in another culture may be reframed within the market-driven higher education context as a form of edu-tourism package deal. If short-term sojourns in Australia are to

provide the stimulus students from the Asia Pacific are seeking in order to develop inter-cultural understandings and personal perspective transformation, then cross-institutional visioning, planning, resourcing and thoughtful curriculum design will be needed.

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